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An interim field report of Suma and Mlabri: Two endangered languages of Laos

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1. Introduction

Based on recently conducted fieldwork, this paper discusses the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of Suma and Mlabri—two endangered languages of Laos. Suma is a Tibeto-Burman language, and Mlabri is a Mon-Khmer language.

2. Suma

2.1 Ethnonym, official classification, and population

Suma [suɿmaɿ] is the autonym of Kongsat, an exonym of seemingly Tai-Kadai origin. Kongsat is recognized as one of the 15 subgroups of Akha, one of the seven Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups in the official ethnic classification of Laos.¹ The autonym Suma, however, is not listed in the classification and, thus, not generally known to other ethnic groups. There is reportedly only one Suma village, named Namnyon, which means “Nyon River.” The village is located in the northern part of the Nam District of Oudomxay Province. Akha, an official ethnic group of Laos, has a relatively large population (112,979 people in the 2015 national census), of which Suma represents a very small subgroup. In the 2015 census, 51 Akhas were reported as living in Namnyon Village (information regarding each subgroup is unavailable in the population census). As there are currently no other reported Akha subgroups, this number can be taken as that of Suma people living in the village. However, they are not a majority in the village. Instead it is the Phunoyots, and they are recognized as one of the nine Phunoy subgroups in the official ethnic classification. Based on the 2015 census, the village also contains 187 Phunoyots (Phunoyot), 19 Khmus, and 2 Lues. According to one of the Suma consultants, who used to be a village head, there are no genuine Suma couples (i.e., where both husband and wife are Sumas) as of 2018.

Originally, there were only Sumas in Namnyon Village, and around 1995, the number of Phunoyots began increasing. At the time of the 2005 national census, Sumas were still a majority: the village comprised 70 Akhas (Suma), 27 Phunoyots (Phunoyot), 3 Khmus, and a person whose ethnic group was unidentified. There are Khmu and Lue villages near Namnyon Village, with whom villagers have some communication. A Suma elder has

¹ The seven Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups are Akha, Phunoy, Lahu, Sila, Hani, Lolo, and Ho.

stated that Sumas came from Muang Wa-Hin of the Nyot U District of Phongsaly Province. Although, it is more likely that Muang Wa-Hin was located in the northern part of the Phongsaly District of Phongsaly Province.²

2.2 Linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects

According to the consultant referenced above, children in Namnyon Village no longer learn Suma as a mother tongue, and the youngest Suma speakers are in their 30s. Given that the over 30s constitute 36.2% of the total rural population (Lao Statistics Bureau 2016:111), there are approximately 18 Suma speakers. As such, Suma probably has the least speakers from the Tibeto-Burman languages of Laos.³ All Suma children in Namnyon Village learn Phunyt or Lao as their mother tongue. Suma is a “definitely endangered” language, as Moseley (2010:12) defines: “The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation.” In contrast, as described by Simons and Fennig (2017:14), Suma is a “shifting” language, “The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.”

In the official ethnic classification, Suma is a subgroup of Akha; however, in a narrow sense, its language is rather different from Akha. Particularly, unlike Akha, Suma has three nasal phonemes (m, n, and ŋ) in the syllable final position: [pem] “to fly,” [aɭpan] “left hand,” and [paŋɭ] “to be full.” About 300 lexical items are given in Kato (2008)—the first linguistic description of Suma. My own fieldwork, conducted since, supplements this earlier research.

3. Mlabri

3.1 Ethnonym, official classification, and population

Mlabri [mlaʔ bri:ʔ] is an autonym that means “forest people.” Exonyms of Mlabri in Lao include Tong luang “yellow leaves” and Khon pa “forest people.” In the official ethnic classification of Laos, Mlabri is recognized as one of the 11 subgroups of Khmu,

² Muang Wa (Muong Oua) and Muang Hin (Muong Hin) are mentioned in Neis (1997:116). For an atlas reference, see Pavie (1999:138).

³ Khatu is a possible exception to this statement. Simmons and Fennig (2017:227) state that there are 5,000 Khaduo (Khatu) speakers in north of Muong Ou Tay, located in the Nyot U District of Phongsaly Province, Laos. Although Kha To (probably Khatu) villages were reported in the northern part of Phongsaly Province in 1894 (Lefèvre-Pontalis 2000:263), more recent information about Khatu in Laos was not available until recently. In January 2008, there were 25 Hato (probably Khatu) in a Hani village of the Nyot U District of Phongsaly Province. In January 2009, Hato sources stated that there were almost no Hato speakers in the village. This information was obtained by Mitsuru Sonoe as part of fieldwork carried out in the village.

one of the 32 Mon-Khmer ethnic groups. However, in some ethnic descriptions such as that of the Department of Ethnicity, Lao National Front for Construction (2005) and the Institute of Sociology (2012), Mlabri is considered to belong to Kri, one of the 32 Mon-Khmer ethnic groups. Kri is a Vietic language (Enfield and Diffloth 2009), whereas Mlabri is considered a Khmuic language. The Mlabri population in Laos is quite small, with only 16 people as of March 2017 (source: Office of Information, Culture and Tourism, Phiang District of Sainyabuli Province). They live in the Nam Pui NPA forest, which is a National Protected Area in the Phiang District of Sainyabuli Province. About 400 Mlabri also live in Thailand (Long, Long, and Waters 2017:273), and some sources suggest the Mlabri also have a presence in Myanmar (Lahu National Development Organization 2015 and Herda 2007).

3.2 Linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects

Jørgen Rischel carried out fieldwork with the Mlabri of Laos on three separate occasions between 1999 and 2001. He published some of his results before his death in 2007 (Rischel 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007). Since the number of speakers is extremely limited, I decided to conduct fieldwork with the Mlabri of Laos. I worked with five Mlabri speakers since 2013. Their ostensible ages of the consultants range from the 20s to the 30s, and are possibly younger than those encountered by Rischel. Rischel (2001:9-10) states that Mlabri's proficiency in Lao was quite low, and it was sufficiently difficult to elicit information using Lao as the means of communication. My own impression was similar, although it appears that my consultants were slightly more proficient in Lao.

Currently, Mlabri children seem to learn Mlabri as their mother tongue, and intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted. Mlabri can thus be considered a "safe" language. However, the community itself, with only 16 members, is highly endangered. This is mainly due to the difficulty of maintaining endogamy. It is hence necessary to document the Mlabri of Laos as soon as possible. Rischel (2001:6) notes that the Mlabri of Laos features numerous loanwords from Lao, and it appears that the Mlabri of Laos has been losing some of its native Mon-Khmer words. For example, all five of my consultants could not provide the word for "right hand" and "left hand" in Mlabri. Similarly, two of the five were unable to provide the word for "finger."

4. Conclusion

The number of Suma and Mlabri speakers is approximately the same (fewer than 20). Further work is required to document these languages.

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